



# THE EAR AS THE NEGATIVE ORGAN

NonMusic / 2023-10-11 / becoming, derrida, Ear, techno, ultrablack  
of music / Von Nico Mas

The following is an excerpt from Chapter 5 of the book *Affects & Dreams*: a manual for *Becoming* by niko mas (published by [becoming.press](#)). The book is available directly from the [publisher](#).

About: *Affects & Dreams*, the first book authored by nikomas, is a relatively quick dive into the waters of *Becoming*; a schizo-guide to our publishing practice (why, how, and for what cause do we do what we do. We tell the story of a radio show that bridged our project *Crossdressing Diogenes* with our latest project, *Becoming*.

In telling the story of how we arrived here at all, we have a chance to index all of the fields and domains that [becoming.press](#) has entered into so far, and begins to maniacally draw lines through many subjects. In telling the story of how a radio show hosted by a record label lead to a publishing practice in such a way, we have a chance to begin explicating our take on the changing winds in those most dirty of social sciences and biology. For thousands of years, the West has held music as a matter of pure rationale, something purely of the intellect, but when the body is just an ear itself, and when one might say we are all, at once, being-in-music (or becoming-as-music), how we think about music has to change dramatically, how we speak music or speak about music has to change—music must be able to become something radically “unmusical”, to cast off the Image-of-itself that it, like and as philosophy, has become; we must once again pursue a non-music fit for a non-sociology; or better, we must approach a quantum musical social ontology. This book is our first attempt to write towards a theory of a *Musica Universalis* of the social, the noise (harmony) of the social sphere(s).

Naturally, given the context of the project, we wanted to launch this book alongside a revamped version of our radio show, beginning today on Lumbung Radio at 9am (the live show is aimed at insomniacs who refuse to sleep so that

capital may never dream), but the shows are immediately archived for everyone else to access.

## **Chapter 5—The Ear as the Negative Sense**

It is unsurprising, really, that the deeper into the study of music you go, the more one is forced to contemplate what it means to listen. Music can only be listened to, it is perhaps the only artform besides Sound Art, that is only accessible through the ears, and this is what makes it so unique and so philosophically intangible. There is no object to music, there is no Image to music, and this ultimately means that it is something which resists what we understand to be the privileged senses and the privileged means of knowledge.

As a starting point, Jeremy Gilbert (1999: 57) writes that Derrida's account of phonologocentrism is of particular importance for a discussion of music because it involves a partial consideration of "the status of sound in Western philosophical discourse". The voice is realized as the idyllic "being at one with oneself", which renders the ear as a machine that produces "the pacifying lure of organic indifference" (Derrida, 1991: 156). We can interpret this as suggesting that sound can produce something like a line of flight between interior and exterior, as to say that sound and listening practices can produce the experience of an undifferentiated inside and outside (Gilbert, 1999: 58). The formation of the body-without-organs is precisely possible because sound and listening practices are bringing into line the interior and exterior of many subjectivities, forming one indistinguishable flow of desire (Jordan, 1997: 130). Derrida's work on the *Metaphysics of Presence* essentially critiques the history of metaphysics as bypassing certain modes of experience or knowledge, including, importantly, the ear (Gilbert. 1999: 58). In *Grammatology*, for example, there is a specific critique of this need to create "balanced equations" that ultimately correspond to a

biasing of existence towards a positivistic definition—it is a critique of the association between existence and presence (Derrida, 2016: 306). Western Metaphysics, for Derrida, might be better understood in terms of hegemony, because he figures it as the installation of hierarchies and orders of subordination in the various dualisms that it encounters (Derrida, 1982: 195). From a dualism of Present/Absent, you get a cascading symbolic ordering of Male/Female, Static/Dynamic, Speech/Writing, Eye/Ear, Signifier/Signified, Object/Process, ranked in regard to their relation to the primary image. For Derrida, Metaphysics is an Image of Thought, a mode of organizing knowledge and experience, and it is this binary that has conjured Patriarchy (Söderbäck, 2013: 257). This matches some of the ideas from Lacan that Derrida works in reference to:

“The imaginary is the realm of Gestaltic images which, when perceived, trigger instincts. It is only due to a malfunctioning of the imaginary in the human animal that the symbolic order is produced. Man needs the crutch of the symbolic in order to compensate for his inability naturally to satisfy his vital needs. (These needs are then minimally satisfied but at the cost of their infinitisation into desire.)” —Lewis, 2008: 9

Uninstalling the image of the hierarchical binary is integral to dissolving and deterritorializing capitalism, which, despite masquerading in the disguise of neutrality, is wholly totalizing in its endless positive proliferation. Capitalism is entirely phallogocentric (Gilbert, 1999: 84) It is for this reason that new ideas that challenge Object-Orient Ontology might be called Feminist Metaphysics, as they stand a chance of uninstalling the very assumptions that Patriarchy is sustained by. To elaborate a little further, Derrida suggests that language is rife with ideology and metaphysicsqua installed biases; language can reinforce ideologies. The words we have to speak betray what we wish to say, and the aforementioned case of “less is more” is a prime example of the way language is weighted.

Another example could be the word ex-ist(stand-out?), which defines that which exists as existing positively, that which is real is that which stands out. Yet, sound is not there, neither are virtual fields, so they don't ex-istas long as the word we have to identify existence is built on top of an 'ex'. Furthermore, there are idioms that allude to this preference, such as: "I won't believe it 'til I see it.", "Don't believe what you hear". Is there a greater sin than beginning a sentence with "I heard..."? Found within this discourse of Derrida and the Ear is a kind of aphorism set out originally by Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (2016), that seems to summarize much of this:

"Must one first batter their ears, that they may learn to hear with their eyes?"—  
Nietzsche, 2016, 52

This is a very poetic rendering of the crisis Western metaphysics faces, a kind of philosophical deafness, or an ocularcentrism. To bring this back to the story, Affective Radio(as it was called at this point in the story) was asking a question about the social affectivity of broadcasting music in the specific context of capitalist realism. Capitalist realism describes an affective process that causes subjects within capitalism to lose sight of an alternative to capitalism (Fisher, 2009: 16). So, for example, to jilt someone in the context of capitalist realism would be a moment where, put simply, they might suddenly realize that things could be done differently.

This then ties into ocularcentrism, or a privileging of the eye over the ear, because of a concept which is adjacent to capitalist realism. In a similar vein of thinking, Baudrillard had argued that reality had transformed into hyperreality, a simulation entirely constituted by representations. In the same way that it can seem impossible to talk your way out of Patriarchy when the language we use to speak is a replication of the same thing Patriarchy is a replication of. Capitalism has

developed to a point where everything has become a representation of Capital, thus we lose sight of an alternative to Capital as it “seamlessly occupies the horizon of the thinkable” (Fisher, 2009: 12). Another word for representation is Image, and here we really begin to see the chemistry between Derrida’s work on Logocentrism and Ocularcentrism, Fisher’s Capitalist realism, and Baudrillard’s Hyperreality, and how it all ties into the work of Deleuze & Guattari on Faciality in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005: 167).

It is insinuated that the ear is the means to escape this visual encirclement —we are taught to only use our eyes, then our eyes are flooded with representations, enclosing us in a reality that is more distant than ever from any sense of the real. The importance of the role of music in this situation can be articulated quite elegantly by referring to one of Brian Schroeder’s interpretations of Nietzsche’s *The Listening Eye*:

“Music, it appears, best approximates the unchanging channel of eternal recurrence, the ceaseless differentiating flows of existence, whose terror lies in its refusal to be reduced to an image” (Schroeder, 2001: 194)

Music terrorizes the rational, therefore it terrorizes the hegemony of the Image. Insofar as it relates to the symbolic order, music is the ultimate negative art, alongside Dance (Mas, 2023), but that is another book entirely, because the ear is the negative organ and therefore listening is the negative faculty of understanding, and minimalism is the negative music. If hyperreality and Patriarchy are matters of hegemonic positivism that are poetically summarized in Nietzsche’s aphorism, anti-hegemonic or post-hegemonic negativism would be poetically summarized as an inversion of Nietzsche:

Must one gouge out their eyes, that they learn to see with their ears.



Instead of gouging out the eyes of our listeners, it was safer to think about the affectivity of the transmissions we wanted to make in terms of how else could we tempt people away from ocularcentrism, and to encourage getting lost in the sound. Minimalism fit the criteria, because, as we have seen already, it was a practice of music that really tried to emphasize the use of the ear by breaking from the usual modes of composition that critics left and right were condemning as banal and derivative —there hasn't been a breakin music in since Rave (Fisher, 2014, 35; Reynolds, 2010), or in other words, there hasn't been a formal transcendence in music, not in the way that Carrière (2023, 42) argues Titian achieved with the establishment of Brutalism. Just because music cannot be reduced to an Image, it doesn't mean that Capital hasn't tried, and one might argue that the derivative nature of most music renders them as also being mere representations, or as something that is as close to an Image as it can get.

Yet, minimalism was part of the last great break in music, especially given its immense influence on Rave, something which itself has an intense history of being in conflict with capitalist hegemony. We would argue with this project that minimalism didn't just "make you listen more", we argue that it is specifically designed to encourage a mode of listening, or a practice of listening that contradicts hegemony's internal replications inside any subject (language, metaphysics, images of thought). This argument is based on the work of Maria Cichosz, who describes, and argues in favor of, a practice of listening that she would call Deep Listening, or affective attentiveness.

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